

VISIONS

DAVID HOLZMAN, piano

ERNEST BLOCH • *Visions & Prophecies* • *Ex Voto*

PAUL BEN-HAIM • *Five Pieces for Piano*

TZVI AVNI • *Epitaph*

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG • *Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11*

STEFAN WOLPE • *from the Palestinian Notebook*



This compact disc presents keyboard masterpieces by five of our century's most acclaimed Jewish composers. The sampling of the rich and varied traditions of Jewish music seems especially appropriate as this is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel.

A somewhat mischievous note of caution creeps in, however, when one attempts to define precisely what "Jewish music" is. Apart from that which can be heard as either liturgical or folk, one faces an enormous gray area of diverse styles (often in the same work), national influences and musical personalities. All of which is to say that "Jewish music" is much more similar to than distinct from other music. This is especially true in America today as younger composers have shed much of their teacher's and their teacher's teacher's heritage. Jewish composers themselves exhibit all the strengths and all the weaknesses found among all musicians as of all humanity.

When describing great works of art of all styles or origins, massive or minuscule in scope, one is speaking in part of the "vision" of its creator. This is not a mystical term; rather it describes an overarching personal statement which envelops the work and, when combined with formal coherence, creates a sense of artistic truth.

While this "vision" is common to all great art, the creator can cast his gaze in many different directions: upward towards the heavens; inward towards the mysteries of the self; outward towards the sights and sounds of the world; backward to the past or forward to the future.

This sense of "Jewish music" is perhaps to be found here; while all art contains a vision, the Jewish vision is distinct in just what the artist, in this case the composer, sees and feels.

Ernest Bloch (b. Geneva 1880; d. Portland, Oregon 1959)

Ernest Bloch's early studies took him from Geneva to Frankfurt to Munich and to Paris. He lectured on aesthetics at the Geneva Conservatory and in 1916 emigrated to the United States where he taught at the Mannes College of Music in New York. His works from 1911 to 1916, including his famous *Schelomo*, are Jewish-inspired both in subject and style.

He was director of the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1920 and the San Francisco Conservatory in 1925. He returned to Europe in the 1930's and returned to the United States yet again in 1940 where he was influential as both teacher and composer.

Bloch's *Visions and Prophecies* by its very title indicates a composer looking backward to the Old Testament, perhaps as solace for the turmoil around him (the martial rhythms and strident harmonies of his 1939 Piano Sonata are an example of Bloch's gaze planted firmly in the present). In *Visions and Prophecies* one can not only identify which movements are visions and which prophecies but to some extent can identify them with specific Bible figures.

'60's his style took in more advanced elements such as serialism and electronic music. Jewish mysticism left a mark on his musical style as tonal and more advanced non-tonal elements merge. His music has received many prizes including the ACUM Prize for his *Epitaph (Sonata No. 2)* recorded here.

Of the works recorded here, *Epitaph (Sonata No. 2)*, written between 1944 and 1979, owes the most to the Jewish liturgical tradition. This is so not merely because of its inspiration from the transcendental legend about the brook (synonymous with "fountain" of the title) and the heart of the world by the 18th Century Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. In addition, unlike Bloch and Ben-Haim, where the use of Jewish modes is purely coloristic, Avni uses quasi-cantorial phrases with their pervasive augmented seconds and tritones as a crucial expressive and structural element. It is this, plus the slow-moving harmonies and ostinato rhythms, which creates a mystical sense of timelessness, perhaps closer to Scriabin than Messaien.

While the colors are, like Bloch and Ben-Haim, reminiscent of French Impressionism, the overall vision is surely gazing upward towards the imponderable heavens. Much as the final movement of *Visions and Prophecies*, the majesty of the mountain and the slowly dissipating turbulence of the brook conflict with the very human warmth of the heart of the world. They gradually merge within the eternal harmony of God's universe. The work was written for Varda Nishry, who died in 1995.

There is a mountain on which lies a rock and from the rock flows a fountain. Each thing in the world has a heart and the world in its entirety also has a heart. And the heart of the world has a perfect configuration, with a face and hands and feet and so on, yet even a toe-nail of the heart of the world is more heartsome than any other heart. And the mountain with its fountain stands at one edge of the world and on the other edge stands the heart of the world. And the heart is situated opposite the fountain and it longs to go to the fountain with deep yearning. And the longings of the heart and its yearnings for the fountain are very strong. And the heart cries out unceasingly in its great desire to go to the fountain. And the fountain also yearns with all its might for the heart of the world.

And the heart has two weaknesses: one is caused by the scorching sun, and the other, by the strength of its yearning for the fountain, and by its prolonged crying and desire to go to the fountain. And when the heart tires and wishes to breathe deeply, a great bird comes and spreads its wings and shades it from the sun. Then the heart rests for a while, although even during its rest it does not take its eyes off the fountain and does not cease to yearn for it.

Yet if the heart yearns so for the fountain, why does it not go to it? Because should it attempt to go nearer to the mountain at the summit of which is the fountain, the summit of the mountain would vanish from its sight together with the fountain (this being the nature of a high mountain, that its summit may only be seen from a distance and vanishes when approached). And as soon as it loses sight of the fountain, the heart perishes, for its life depends on the fountain. And if the heart perishes, the world must perish,

caused many (Schoenberg among them) to convert from Judaism in an often vain attempt to maintain their professional lives. These pressures, felt by all creative people, were a major impetus towards the need to explore the deepest recesses of the soul and the contradictory and often ugly emotions which lay within.

Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke op. 11* display the full spectrum of emotions from the evanescent lyricism of the first to the warmth and longing of the second to the brutal violence of the third. What is more important, and typical of Schoenberg's works of this period, is the mingling of the contradictory emotions. In the third piece, a grandiose gesture will often be followed by a mocking rebuke. The opening lyricism of the first piece is, in its next manifestation, a taut chromatic line with a new and menacing counterpoint. The harsh violence of its next appearance gradually softens towards the final utterance which brings warmth, though it too evaporates at the close.

Stefan Wolpe (b. 1902; d. 1972)

Stefan Wolpe has been recognized as one of the most important and influential composers of the second half of the Century. He grew up in the cultural and political turbulence of the Weimar Republic. He attended the Berlin Hochschule für Musik from 1919 to 1924. A major influence was his study of Neo-classicism with Ferruccio Busoni in 1920. Deeply involved in radical politics, Wolpe was also influenced by his associations with De Kooning, Klee and artists of the Bauhaus. Later in the '20's, the influences of jazz and Dadaism make their appearance. In 1933, Wolpe fled to Vienna where he studied with Webern for several months. From there, he emigrated to Palestine in 1934. While in Palestine, he absorbed Semitic traits into his music. Wolpe arrived in the United States in 1938, living primarily in New York. He was active as both teacher and composer and many of the major composers of the past two decades were deeply influenced by his teachings as well as his music.

We have encountered images from the Old Testament, vistas from the land of Palestine, mystical visions of the Universe and the expressionistic exploration of the self. This compact disc concludes with Stefan Wolpe's celebration of the Jewish folk heritage in dance and song. Wolpe's *Palestinian Notebook* was written in 1939 upon his arrival in New York from Palestine. His friend and publisher Joseph Marx had urged Wolpe to create these vignettes which are arrangements of popular Palestinian songs and dances.

At first glance, they seem an utter anomaly in the context of his avant-garde pursuits, but music of the people, whether proletarian, ethnic or jazz, was always a part of his life. Even in the

American works.

David Holzman has participated as both performer and lecturer at many festivals including the first-ever Wolpe Festival in Toronto, the Darmstadt Festival, the Leningrad Spring Festival and the Wolpe Symposium in Philadelphia where his performance of Wolpe's *Battle Piece* was described as 'titanic' in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. Most recently, he has toured Israel, presenting recitals and lectures on both Jewish and American music. An active lecturer and writer, his essay, "Wolpe's Battle Piece: Contrasting Approaches" is part of a collection of essays on Wolpe and his Preface to Wolpe's keyboard works of 1939-1942 appears in the Peer Musikverlag edition of the music.

Producer: Joel Gordon

Assistant Producer: Erika Hurwitz

This recordings was made at Jordan Hall of the New England Conservatory of Music in August, 1997.

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